



WORLD & NATION

Gone to the Dogs : Gold-Mining Town Left With Only Memories of Its Heyday

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DOGTOWN, Calif. — This 19th-Century Gold Rush town, five miles up a one-lane twisting mountain road from Angels Camp, is but a memory today. Not much is left of Dogtown, and what little is left is rapidly falling apart.

In its heyday from 1849 to the turn of the century, Dogtown was one of the biggest hydraulic mining camps in California. Hundreds of men operating giant hoses equipped with rotating nozzles washed down vast mountain slopes here in search of gold.

“There were Chinese, Chilean, Cornish, French, Indian, Mexican, black and Yankee miners. There were hotels, boardinghouses, a dance hall, stores, saloons, a red-light district and hundreds of cabins and tents scattered about,” recalled Gloyd A. (Bud) Ponte.

“It was a booming mining camp full of stray dogs. That’s how it came by its strange name,” explained Ponte, 71, a rancher, long-time president of the Calaveras Historical Society and a fourth-generation Dogtown resident.

And, for 20 years Dogtown was the home of Windsor A. Keefer, a suave, sophisticated promoter with dark, wavy hair who was reputed to be the best-dressed man in the Mother Lode. He often wore ankle-length fur coats.

A local reservoir bears his name. He built it. He was one of the owners of what is now Calaveras Big Trees State Park, 20 miles northeast of here.

He owned several mines and water companies. He erected one of the first electric-generating plants in the West. He was also accused of floating bogus mining stock and bilking investors in many of his enterprises.

On March 24, 1897, he vanished, never again to be seen. “Was He Murdered?” “Did He Flee to Avoid the Wrath of His Victims?” headlined the newspapers. Stories about the mysterious disappearance of Dogtown’s best-known resident filled California newspapers for weeks.

Eight years later, it was reported that Keefer was seen in Paris, living the life of luxury. But there is no proof that the story was true.

Today, all that remains of old Dogtown are scattered building foundations and half a dozen wooden structures on the verge of collapse. Surrounding ranches and three homes of relatively recent vintage along French Gulch Creek occupy what once was a riotous mining camp.

“There’s still gold in these hills. Those old-time miners didn’t get it all,” insisted Lenny Owen, 33, one of three prospectors living in Dogtown. Bernie Dorsey, 43, and his wife Carolyn, 33, are the other two who hope to strike it rich in the old Dogtown diggings.

Rancher Bud Ponte’s great-grandfather was one of the original Dogtown miners. He had been a ship’s captain, sailing out of El Paraiso, Chile, when he got gold fever, gave up the sea and sought his fortune here.

Ponte was born in Dogtown, as were his parents and grandmother. His grandparents and father went to Dogtown School.

He pointed to a collection of old news stories that document the town's share of gunfights, excitement, tragedies and unusual occurrences. When the Ross Reservoir gave way in 1899 and flooded Dogtown, it swept away a good part of the mining camp, including Otto Lunt, who rushed to his cabin to save his dog.

Lunt, a miner from Germany, was last seen alive holding his dog in his arms and waving from the window of his cabin as it floated away in the raging waters.

One news story described the suicide of Charlie Ferants, a singer of Spanish songs in a Dogtown cabaret. He hanged himself from a tree. Shortly after that, the tree died, too.

Another story was about woodchopper Manuel Lopez, who found \$300 in \$20 gold pieces in a hollow in a tree he felled. He took the money, went to town and drank himself to death, all in the same day.

"All we have left is memories. Like memories of the old Dogtown schoolteachers: Lizzie Kaler, Mayme Duffy, Annie Gallagher, and Mrs. Mulgrew," Ponte mused.

"Justice in Dogtown was quick in my great-grandfather's time. If somebody did something wrong--robbed somebody, stole a horse or assaulted a woman--he was strung up before sundown. That was the way it was when Dogtown was in its prime."

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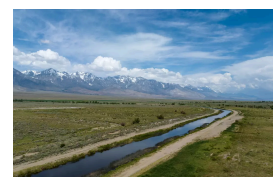
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